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STATE NATURAL AREA



LITTLE BLACK SLOUGH STATE NATURAL AREA

Situated in a remote section of the Cache River Valley, the Little Black Slough State Natural Area is a 3,600 acre natural jewel. Most nearly resembling wilderness in Illinois, the area is a mixture of primeval tupelo and cypress swamps, rich floodplain forests, familiar upland woods and small patches of limestone prairie glades.

The breathtaking beauty of towering tupelo and cypress trees rising from the still waters of the swamp is a unique sight in Illinois. The Little Black Slough area contains a true southern swamp straining to reach its northernmost range.

Owned and managed by the Illinois Department of Conservation, the property is administered by the nearby Ferne Clyffe State Park.

History

Main Brothers Box and Lumber Company of Karnak was the largest landowner of the area. Through their wise management techniques, areas abandoned after earlier cultivation were planted in trees between 1959 — 1964. The areas logged by this company show very little evidence of disturbance.

The Burlington-Northern Railroad also maintains an active line that passes through the Little Black Slough area. It was completed in 1910. A settlement known as Scalin Spur, once existed along the railroad on Boss Island (verbal corruption of Bost, a family of early settlers). Little evidence of the settlement exists today. In spite of previous land clearing and heavy logging, the remoteness of much of the area resulted in their remaining in virgin conditions.

In 1970, the Department of Conservation purchased 1,123 acres that now comprise the Heron Pond-Wildcat Bluff Nature Preserve due to its unique ecological value. In 1972, the Illinois Nature Preserve Commission recommended the additional purchase of the 2,506 acre Little Black Slough area. The Main Brothers sold their holdings in 1973, including the Little Black Slough, to the Westvaco Corporation. With the assistance of the Nature Conservancy, the tract was acquired by the State of Illinois in 1975.

Today, approximately half of the Little Black

Slough Natural Area is dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, insuring its preservation for posterity for future generations.

Vegetation

The Cache River once flowed through the valley now occupied by Little Black Slough. The river changed its course during an ancient period of excessive flooding. The resulting erosion of the bedrock created the present day land forms. The plant communities of this diverse area vary from tupelo and cypress swamps and sloughs to floodplain and upland forests to dry blufftop woods and hillside prairie glades.

Heron Pond is a dense bald cypress forest named for the herons which nest in the huge cypress trees. Trees of the type found here are among the oldest living things east of the Mississippi River. Some have been aged to between 500 and 1,000 years of age.

Much of the Little Black Slough area is dominated by water tupelo with scattered cypress stands. In the more open swamp areas are shrubs such as the Virginia willow, swamp rose and buttonbush.

The swamp border and low floodplain woods contain such trees as Drummond's red maple, red elm, pumpkin ash, overcup oak, and pin oak. The surrounding hilly areas are a striking contrast to the lowlands with tulip trees, sweetgum, and spicebush. Oaks are also common. Poison ivy is the most common understory species in these areas.

Well developed limestone glades occur on Wildcat Bluff with many prairie herbs and grasses. Little bluestem, side oats grama, big bluestem, prairie dock, and Indian grass can be seen in these areas.

Wildlife

Little Black Slough Natural Area offers a variety of habitat for many types of wildlife.

The area provides an excellent opportunity for bird-watching. The great blue heron, green heron, the rare-yellow-crowned night heron, are regularly found here. The pileated woodpecker, black and turkey vultures and the rare Swainson's warbler are among the other common species. The patient observer may even spot the elusive woodcock as he performs his spectacular spiraling dives, part of their dramatic ritual during the mating season. Many

species of waterfowl are seasonal visitors; wood ducks and hooded mergansers nest in the swamps.

Visitors may encounter various mammals such as red and grey foxes, fox and grey squirrels, mink, muskrat, beaver, swamp and cottontail rabbits, and coyotes. On rare occasions, signs of the endangered bobcats and river otters can be seen. At dusk a glimpse of the rare and endangered Indiana bat may be caught as it sweeps over the water in search of insects. Many types of unusual fish are found in the area. These include the bowfin, grass pickerel, slough darter, channel catfish, and the pygmy sunfish. These species are typically considered southern residents.

Various reptiles and amphibians inhabit the Little Black Slough area. The rare mole salamander is one of the residents. Most notable of this group are the three venomous snakes common in extreme southern Illinois. These are the copperhead, timber rattlesnake and the cottonmouth snakes. While they are not life-threatening, it is best to be observant and cautious while visiting the area.

Trails

There are 14.4 kilometers (9 miles) of trails through Little Black Slough. Each is designed to introduce the visitors to various habitats found in the area.

- **Heron Pond Trail —**

2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles)

This easy trail's highlight is the floating boardwalk that allows the visitor access to the heart of the swamp.

- **Little Black Slough Trail —**

10.4 kilometers (6.5 miles)

Bald cypress and tupelo swamps, massive sandstone bluffs, floodplain forests and hillside glades highlight this moderately difficult trail.

- **Goose Pond Spur Trail —**

1.6 kilometer (1 mile)

This moderately difficult trail is an extension of the Little Black Slough Trail, leading to a unique bald cypress pond.

The acquisition and establishment of the Little Black Slough State Natural Area was due to successful cooperation between private, governmental, and commercial groups working togeth-

er to protect this unique, primitive resource. All plants, animals and natural features of the area are protected by law to insure its existence for future generations.



Scientific and educational use of the area is allowed by permit, issued by the Illinois Department of Conservation. Hunting and fishing are allowed in the area outside of the nature preserve as designated on the map. For more information about the area contact; Site Superintendent, Ferne Clyffe State Park, P.O. Box 120, Goreville, Illinois 62939, (618) 995-2411. For information on other land and historic sites, write the Illinois Department of Conservation, Land and Historic Sites, 524 S. Second St., Springfield, IL 62706.

